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*A* PALACE  
NEAR  
*the* WIND

AI JIANG

TITAN BOOKS



# 1 BRIDEWEALTH

Chui-liu blew on the white and blue rain blooms as she clutched tight their navy stems. The dozens of slender arms protruding from their tips held onto teardrop-like bulbs. Her breath scattered the seeds so they may travel and grow elsewhere.

One ancient story passed down in Feng told of the floating seeds helping those who blew them to find what they were seeking. There was little doubt my sister and I were praying for the same thing: to find our sisters and mother. We denied the possibility of their death for the annuals they had spent, sight unseen, within the Palace. Grandmother would've told us. We would've held a funeral.

All we held now was our silence and uncertainty.

Even with sunlight beckoning the forest to stretch its limbs and drink its rays, the warmth was not comforting.

It battered and scorched my body, igniting the pent-up anger and sorrow within.

A sob welled at the thought of my three younger sisters and mother when they were still in Feng. Back then, it felt as though our home was in an eternal spring. At dusk, in the rain-bloom fields, Yunshu, Heshi, Sangshu, and I offered whispers of our dreams of love, of age, of adventure. Mother always watched, settled under a nearby storm tree, with a gentle smile reaching her eyes. It had been three annuals since second-youngest sister Sangshu married the King. She'd be twenty-three annuals if she was alive. She is. Or so I told myself.

Chuilu was unaware of my sorrow as I shielded my face from her, not wanting my youngest sister to watch as I crumbled. I imagined the rain-bloom droplets lifting into the sky with my own sap tears.

"Will the seeds find them?" Chuilu's eyes were like earthy moons.

"The natural gods and the wind will guide them." A lie.

I, too, would soon be married to the King. I couldn't tell her I would act as her seeking rain bloom. All she had to do was wait for my return.

"Lufeng," Grandmother's voice drifted from behind. "It is time."

I patted Chuilu's head, her dark needle threads soft against the rough bark of my skin, and nudged her towards the cluster of hollows making up our home

in Feng. Reluctant at first, her shoulders then drooped before she trotted away. Grandmother and I waited until she disappeared into the storm trees' embrace.

Two individuals must settle the negotiation of bridewealth; they must be close—yet not too close—to the soon-to-be-married couple's families.

This was the first time marriage negotiations were taking place in Feng.

My mother's sister, Xiangmu, and Copper, the King's aunt, would meet to negotiate the terms of my marriage to the King. The Palace grounds tore forth again, growing ever closer to our home. Only through the marriages would there be a chance to halt—or at least delay—the relentless expansions.

I followed Grandmother away from the fields towards the edge of Feng and waited for Copper to exit the Palace. We stood obscured by large storm-tree leaves, grey, shifting, like a slice of dark sky and clouds contained within the naturally serrated edges. Driven by slivers of wind, the tree brewed small hurricanes and tornadoes, a flurry of branches and trunks intertwining. Yet, only soft tickles graced our fingertips when we brushed the storm leaves aside, like collected dust, touchable clouds, soft tumbleweeds.

The gates of the Palace yawned like the opening of a freshly dug grave. Settled on top of a bulky and imposing

Traveler, Copper towered over both the Palace guards, whose machines were half the height of hers. They flanked Copper both ahead and behind, adorned in pooling black cloaks with the hoods drawn up, hanging just before the lips. The controlled strides of the Travelers' mechanical legs creaked metallically, resounding between the Palace and Feng. Copper and the Palace guards moved forth in a rhythm, too steady, on their Travelers, with silver legs, feet, and talons resembling those of birds.

The Palace was too far—an hour away by wind, far less on a Traveler—for the eyes and ears of those who lived within the Palace, Land Wanderers. But the sound met us early. The same with sight. Even Grandmother, ancient in her age, could see every detail of a single feather on a bird's wing several gusts of winds away. I had heard Land Wanderers had no such capabilities.

The walls extending skywards around the Palace grazed the clouds. The Palace itself seemed encased in a bone mold—rigid, still... dead. Few had seen past the walls. Along the bottom, there were more waiting tiles, stacked on top of uprooted trees and dead undergrowth like feeble fingers, clutching, scraping, futile.

If I had the power, if the wind ever allowed—though I knew the natural gods were never in favor of chaos—I would show the King what it was like to have his home threatened, to feel attacked, to be afraid. And I would mock his terror in silence.

At the abrupt end of the bone-tiled path stretching forth with the width of a large forest stream, the three halted in unison halfway to Feng. The guards retreated. Copper continued forth alone. Her smooth, bronzed skin and slender arms were so unlike our own rough bark faces and carved branch limbs. Her white cloak billowed; her hood framed her face. I winced when the metal talons of her Traveler sank into the grass, uprooting with each step, leaving scars, marring our lands.

When Copper neared, seemingly only moments later, though the sun had already gone, I melted into the shadows and trailed behind—unseen and unheard—as she made for Aunt Xiangmu’s home near the heart of Feng.

The Wind Walkers exited their hollows and watched with bowed heads as the King’s aunt passed. Some marveled at the Traveler; some stared with scorn; a few withdrew into their homes, the sight too horrific; while others stood, feet bracing both the earth beneath them and the wind hovering near them—sometimes we borrowed for travel, and other times we borrowed for strength.

Each step Copper’s Traveler took pierced into the organs of Feng. I reimagined the ground as Copper, the Traveler’s legs as my fingers, and the King as the soil crumbling beneath the talons.



Near the entrance of Aunt Xiangmu's home sat Copper's Traveler, legs withdrawn, the half-shell body settled on the ground. Without her machine, Copper's height was swallowed by the hollow's intertwined roots reaching endlessly upwards, roofless. Beneath, branches wormed down into the earth, rippling. Storm vines hung from leaning hollow trunks, making it almost impossible to see inside—almost. The woven branch walls rippled every few seconds, allowing small glimpses into the earthy chamber, now an intruded-upon haven. I liked to call these homes eyes for the way they blinked.

I crouched on the other side of a shifting opening, caught a rippling, and tugged it to widen the gap.

During prior negotiations, Aunt Xiangmu would glide as if on clouds towards the Palace, guided by the wind, while my sisters, Grandmother, and I bid her a silent farewell half-hidden behind the walls of Feng—tangled, spiraling in place like churning clouds, rumbling storms. Perhaps this slight change, bringing a member of the Palace to us, meant we were making progress in reclaiming our lands. Or perhaps the King was only toying with us—giving us false hope before taking it away.

Chuilu tugged at my cloak. Even at full height, she only reached my hip, and I was shorter than most from Feng, only past five feet, halfway to six. "Fengfeng."

The Feng—*Phoenix*—in my name was not the same

meaning as the Feng, *Wind*, of our home, but my youngest sister, still having difficulties with the distinct tones, always made the same mistake.

“Feng—” I raised a finger to my lips and beckoned her closer as I leaned down towards her. Though Chuiliu was naturally quiet, her whispers sounded thunderous with only the wind against the grass and a single cricket’s call.

She lowered her voice until it was almost inaudible. “What are you doing?”

“Watching. Listening.” I wrapped my arms around her slight frame and brought her to a squat, our limbs of braided and tangled branches blending with the hollow. The only thing distinguishing our legs from one another was the newness of her roots: no moss, loose, as though they would unravel with a strong passing breeze.

I clutched Chuiliu’s hand harder than she was clutching mine. In an unexpected gesture, she reached behind me, offering rhythmic pats the same way Mother used to soothe us all. Though she was the youngest, often her maturity surprised me.

Together, we watched the negotiations unfold.

Aunt Xiangmu sat across from Copper in her dinner hollow, one that remained empty elsetime, with hands settled on top of a scarred table made from the remains

of our ancestors, their faces lit by a single candle Copper had brought with her, now almost burnt out. I winced as drops of melted wax met the table, as if burning our dead.

Each aunt had an emptied shell filled with tea made from riverside herbs. We didn't need such things, but we understood Land Wanderers required different nourishment. Water, soil, sunlight, and moonlight were enough to sustain us. Land Wanderers were always picky, according to Aunt Xiangmu. Yet my younger sisters were always eager, hungry, to hear more about the Palace and its people. *There's nothing better than our home*, I used to remind them, as Grandmother would me. My sisters would sulk and return to playing in the rain-bloom fields, or sometimes past those, swinging or crawling through vineyard thickets.

Copper pulled a second candle from her white cloak.

In Feng, we only borrowed Moonglows, tiny insects carrying the moon's light in their bodies, and we always allowed them to leave when they wished. We didn't need the light for our eyesight adjusted to the time of moon. Moonglows were mainly for company, comfort, celebration. Yunshu and Heshi had a habit of beckoning Moonglows into their hairs, complimenting one another on the beauty of their needle threads. Chuiliu liked to stare in silence, wordless, at the Moonglows with a small grin.

But there was also a different type of Moonglow with

the same name, which grew where their crescents hung in trees, a slow juggle across the sky. For those of us injured or nearing death, Moonglows were ground, mixed, poured down throats, churned within ourselves to heal, to purify. It felt like the dim recollection of the sun at dawn, a small embrace during the nights. And sometimes, it was used for tea.

“Thank you,” Aunt Xiangmu began in Script, the tongue of Land Wanderers, gesturing to the tea in front of Copper. “For coming all the way here.”

It was a strange clang and clink of words, grinding together like gears. Even though we knew Script too—the bare minimum—most of us had no reason to use it unless we encountered Palace folk. I’d known no other spoken tongue than that of the wind—Breath, like rhythmic leavings of air from our lungs to shape the words we spoke—until I turned twenty a few annuals prior.

“Well, the King wanted to extend his respects to the Wind Walkers. The situation has been uneasy between our people, hasn’t it?” Copper took a sip, wrinkled her nose. “It’s cold.”

“Is it not to your liking?” Aunt Xiangmu took a sip of her own tea, unfazed.

Copper pressed her lips together. “No, no. Just... different.” The movement was slight, but when Copper placed her shell down, she slid it away.

I held my tongue. I wondered if Aunt Xiangmu had drunk the hot tea she once spoke about being served at